

MODERN GERMAN LITERATURE

By HERMANN SCHÄFER

Like any of the arts, literature is the expression of the soul of a nation. When a nation is sick, as the German nation was after the Great War, its predominant literary production is also pathological, destructive, and negative. When the nation recovers, a new literature makes its appearance. Its leading writers then are either men who were not understood and little known before or members of the younger generation. The following article deals with three men who stand in the front rank of the writers of present-day Germany.

The author has been in close touch with German literature since the days of his youth. He left Germany in 1931 and has lived in Japan ever since.—K.M.

MODERN German literature has grown from the German people's character and traditions. Its underlying forces are the peasant spirit and the soldier spirit. By "peasant spirit" we mean the feeling of being deeply rooted in the soil, a characteristic not only of peasant life itself but gradually manifesting itself throughout the entire life of Germany. And by "soldier spirit" we mean the determined, purposeful, and disciplined attitude not only in war time but always and in every sphere of life.

THE HIDDEN GERMANY

Although this literature passed through a number of intermittent stages and errors in the course of the years, and even lost itself now and again, it always found the way back to itself and, above all, never surrendered its true value. In the years of its beginning and early growth, the "chroniclers and commentators of decadence, the lovers of the morbid and of death, the aesthetes with the tendency toward the precipice," as Thomas Mann once characterized himself and his companions, assailed it as literature of the lowest peasant level. After 1933, German emigrants and foreign writers called it politically tendentious (in the bad sense of the word), bloodthirsty, saber-rattling, and "a literature written at the order of the Nazis." However, the saying: "That which did not kill it only served to make it stronger" proved itself correct in the case of this

literature too. Stronger than all opposition was the vast process of recovery that gradually spread throughout the German nation. And it was these maligned writers of the "hidden Germany" who had an infallible sense of that recovery and who now began to tell of the new Reich that was emerging.

Although the works of these prophets and pioneers of the Third Reich mirror the sober, iron forces which, through struggle and will power, have led to the forming of the new Reich and which are to remain as its basis, their contents are not exhausted by that. In them there can also be found a peace, a quiet, a contemplation, an introspection, that fill the reader with a deep sense of happiness. The national content of this literature is revealed not only in the national-political fighting poems, but just as often in the quiet creations which show the individual in daily life, in the life of the community, and in the world-wide kingdom of the arts and of ageless imagination.

It is impossible even to mention here the names of all these forerunners and creators of the national German literature of present times. Consequently, we have chosen from this number only three, Rudolf G. Binding, Hans Grimm, and Gerhard Schumann, since we regard Binding and Grimm as worthy representatives of the older generation of the writers of the German nation, while Schumann is one of the poets of the new Germany.

THE ARTIST AND HIS TIME

Rudolf G. Binding, this extraordinary man, this singer of upright, straightforward German men, was born in 1867 and spent his childhood and youth in Freiburg, the Black Forest, and Leipzig, where his father was a professor of law at the university. He is characterized by the words he wrote in an introduction to a volume of photographs of the works of Georg Kolbe, the sculptor :

"A fearless artist always reproduces the present. He does not have to turn to it, to learn its ideals; he reproduces it all out of his own longing. He expresses our truth, the truth of our time; its characteristics are: simplicity, soberness, no ecstasies, no raptures, no extravagance, no excessive pathos, no intemperance. He and his time both have the same faith, the same look, the same confidence: they both seek for what is unalterable, ultimate, simplest, irrefutable, inexorable."

What Binding says here about his friend could just as well apply to all his own works. And one would like to add that, wherever people speak about the exalted minds of Germany, this fastidious writer of the heart and shape of the German soul should not be forgotten. For, after all, the purity of the heart usually resembles the purity of what is external and visible, and both require daily care in order not to fall victim too soon to dirt and dust. Only through maintaining an attitude and leading a life full of character can a writer exert a cleansing, healing, and strengthening influence on his nation. It is an old desire of the human race and at the same time one of the basic demands of our era

of rebirth that the visible also be good and beautiful, that the attitude correspond to the words, the deed to the command, and the discipline of the ruler to his rule. Binding has personified this desire to a rare degree; for, like his stories and poems, which are all little pictures of the greatest and highest in Man, he too was upright and straight, he who once expressed the wish to be buried standing upright.

Binding tells of his own development in his noble autobiography *Erlebtes Leben* (Life As I Have Lived It). It is an account of the times that goes far beyond the limits of the individual and that also reveals through what manifestations of decadence in the life of Germany he passed, now and again even being touched by them, and yet conquering them in the avowal that he preferred his time and his country to other times and countries into which he might have been born, not because he considered his time and his country especially privileged, but because they



Rudolf G. Binding

concerned him more than other times and countries, because he loved them more deeply and more dearly.

Just as deeply as Binding loved his time, his people, and his country and always frankly admitted this, just as deeply did he love life itself. The world of his works is strongly marked by earthliness and zest for living, even in his ethereally beautiful *Legenden der Zeit* (Legends of Our Time). In the first of these legends, entitled "Coelestina," he tells with classic calm, animated by his own humor, the story of Heaven's perplexity over an angel who has inadvertently fallen to Earth. Delicious is the

word for the humor with which Binding describes in the second of the legends, "St. George's Representative," the only man whom God deems worthy of being the representative of St. George, because of his indefatigable zest for living, for "he could not use a poor, miserable sinner for so important a job." With the third of these legends, "The Little Whip," the author has produced a charming and popular Christmas story for children.

These legends and a number of other stories, among them the famous *Der Opfergang* (The Sacrifice), appeared in the years 1909 to 1911, and made a name for Binding even before the Great War. He was especially popular with young people, who still find pleasure in reading the austere beautiful *Opfergang*, with which the writer has set up a monument to a heroic woman.

AGELESS POET OF THE YOUNGER GENERATION

Indeed, the younger generation has never ceased to count this "ageless" man as belonging to its own ranks. For when, at the age of nearly fifty, he returned from the Great War and lifted up his voice again, it was the younger generation to which he spoke and which listened to him. Its longing was his own, and vice versa, only that he had been endowed with the faculty of being able to say the words which young people needed more than anything else. For he was one of the first to dare to proclaim, while the echo of shots was still dying away and in the midst of the confusion of a disintegrating age, that, in spite of everything, what was taking place was neither "absurd" nor "in vain" but a mighty stroke of destiny, which called for both mourning and pride on the part of the younger generation. The war was not the end for him, but a beginning and the hardest disciplinarian as well as the liberator and awakener of his love for the German people and their destiny. That and nothing else was what the war should also be to the youth of the nation.

He expressed this faith in his book of verse *Stolz und Trauer* (Pride and Mourning) and in the stories *Unsterblichkeit* (Immortality) and *Der Wingult*. The story "Immortality" may be called a small masterpiece of German literature. It is often called the "Richthofen story," for it is the account of a pilot, a strange man of strange greatness, with whom the daughter of a landowner in Flanders, whose fields are being used temporarily by a German pursuit squadron during the Great War, falls deeply in love against her will. In *Aus dem Kriege* (From the War), a book that is still very much worth reading, Binding has given us an unvarnished chronicle of his experiences in the Great War. It contains letters and diary entries as he wrote them at the front under the direct impact of events there.

Although war and the experiences of war have become essentially the "measure of all things" for Binding, we have only touched upon one side of his work in our description so far. We have, for instance, not yet spoken of Binding the passionate rider and lover of horses, who found in the horse a "stricter taskmaster than in his powerful father." We must mention his gayest and happiest little volume, the *Reitvorschrift für eine Geliebte* (Riding Instructions for a Beloved), and his *Heiligtum der Pferde* (Sanctuary of Horses), in which he tells the story of a mighty stallion who roams like a king over the wide pastures of the famous old stud farm of Trakehnen in East Prussia, how the earth trembles at his roar, and how at last he knows the fulfillment of love and mating with an equally noble partner. Nor must we forget Binding the connoisseur of fine wines and his exquisite, tender *Moselfahrt aus Liebeskummer* (Journey on the Moselle Because of Disappointed Love).

Some of Binding's works have appeared in Japanese. Kenji Takahashi and Koji Kunimatsu have translated the stories *Die Waffenbrüder*, *Angelucia*, *Der Opfergang*, and *Unsterblichkeit*. *Wir fordern Reims zur Uebergabe auf* has been translated by Shunro Mori. At present,

Binding's autobiography *Erlebtes Leben* is also being translated.

AN ARTIST ABROAD

When Binding died on August 4, 1938, one of the men who stood mourning at the bier was Hans Grimm who, like Binding, has become an integral part of the history of German literature. With his works, he is one of the most original and clear-sighted reproducers of modern German evolution. For, just as Binding will always remain a knight and poet of our times who identified the idea of freedom with human courage, so Grimm is the sober realist who hides nothing, either from himself or from us, and who in his healthy, intelligent, and taciturn men of action has given us back the half-forgotten figures of German soldiers, peasants, craftsmen, and merchants as they were in times gone by.

Hans Grimm was born in 1875 in Wiesbaden. As a businessman in South Africa (1896-1910), at first as an employee, later as the partner of a firm in Cape Province, he became personally acquainted with the fateful questions of overseas Germans and of Germans in general. In the vast expanses of Africa he became used to looking for the essential in all things and gradually tried to put this down in writing. He began with sketches from the life of Boers and Kaffirs in *Südafrikanische Novellen* (Tales from South Africa) published in 1913. He went on to his settler and horseman stories from German Southwest Africa in *Der Gang durch den Sand* (The Walk Through the Sand), and in the *Olewagen Saga* (The Saga of Olewagen) he attempted to put down a saga-like narra-

tive of tragic content. During the Great War he was a private at the front, till he was recalled in 1917 by the Colonial Office to write *Oelsucher von Duala* (Oil Prospectors of Duala), describing the martyrdom of German prisoners of war in Africa.

After the war, Grimm took six years (1919-1925) to write the great novel of German destiny, *Volk ohne Raum* (Nation Without Space). This work, which appeared in 1926, a mighty epic in prose, has made him a political writer and educator of inestimable influence. One is justified in calling *Volk ohne Raum* a German Odyssey. For what else is this story of Cornelius Friebott but the gigantic diary and the epic review of the German nation during the years before, during, and after the Great War? Grimm himself once said of it that it showed the fate of all Germany, "just as it sometimes happens that the history of an ordinary man simultaneously reveals the fate of his nation."



Hans Grimm

NATION WITHOUT SPACE

Cornelius Friebott, a young man sound both in mind and body, is the son of a middle-class family in a village on the Weser, one of those surplus grandsons of the soil who must look for work in quarries, factories, or mines. Narrowly escaping death in a mine, he breaks loose from the narrowness and oppression of industry; for he still has "freedom within himself" and needs "space about him and sun over his head" in order to become a true, vigorous man. He finds his way to Africa. First he lands in a British colony, where he finds it hard to adjust himself because of his German

sensitiveness and habit of brooding. But then he succeeds through his equally German industriousness and tries "to partake of the goods of the earth and yet to remain German." Later he goes to the German colony of Southwest Africa and joins the campaign of Captain von Erckert against the Hottentots, which is thrillingly described. Finally, he manages to settle down more or less securely.

But then the Great War breaks out, followed by the terrible time of the post-war years—and his German Odyssey goes on. The vicious arbitrariness of the British, who unremittably and with obvious intention endeavor to deny that the Germans have any colonial talent, drives him into innumerable legal trials and heaps want and misery upon him. But, in spite of everything, Friebott retains his German pride. After weeks of confused flight through jungle and veldt, through rains and droughts, he succeeds, a "strange, uncertain, and frightened vagabond," in saving himself and reaching his tortured country. There the sweet-heart of his youth, young Melsene, is waiting for him and becomes his wife.

But even married life cannot force this restless man to settle down. The economic and political collapse around him and his sense of leadership drive him out onto the road to proclaim "the one misery which is common to all German people, to laborer and peasant, prince and beggar, the common misery of desperate lack of living space." So, "like an American quack or a barelegged Nature fiend," he moves from village to village, from one smoky hall to the next and lifts his voice everywhere to demand freedom for Germany and room to work for the German people. In the midst of one of these passionate speeches on the market square of a little place in Saxony, he meets his death by the hand of a political opponent.

CAPTAIN VON ERCKERT'S END

This, in short, is the content of the vast work, a work that flows along in constant controlled passion through 1,299

pages, written in a very individual, almost harsh style that, however, always seems genuine. The book also contains a number of descriptions of lives and events that are rounded off in themselves and which, like Grimm's short stories, represent in their extremely rational style little masterpieces of the German language. This is particularly true of the incident of Captain von Erckert's campaign. This officer goes off with a picked troop of German riders, among them Cornelius Friebott, beyond the eastern border of German Southwest Africa into the desert of the Kalahari, where, after incredible suffering, he succeeds in fulfilling his assigned task. We quote the burial scene from that incident:

The new leader did not make a big speech. Like all of them, he had deep-set eyes. He said: "Here lies our leader Friedrich von Erckert . . . For eight months he did nothing but plan and think and look and prepare for this one morning. You know how he brought about everything, you were all there with him. When his day succeeded, he was struck by one of the first bullets; he was probably the first among the fallen, the other twelve followed him later. Those who want to, may have a last look at our captain's face. We cannot take our dead with us. We are burying them here in the English Kalahari. They lie for us like guards before German Southwest Africa."

After that he said, no longer with the purposely barking voice of an officer, but with that of any loved son speaking of his loved mother: "I want to read to you what the Captain wrote down for himself in his notebook on the way here from Molentean, I want to read that to you now, although no one would have ever heard it or seen it if he were still alive." And so he read, now with his barking voice again: "Above all, the greatest self-respect. To do nothing mean, keep body and soul clean. Always to control oneself; to be selfless, cheerful, and brave. To tell oneself that a straight, upright attitude is the expression of a straight, upright soul. To have pleasure in simple things; not to demand the impossible, but to apply patience, endurance, and concentrated will power to a goal that can be reached. Never remain in filth. Even the best can sometimes get into it, but no one need stay in it."

Then they lowered their dead, covered with horse blankets, into the graves; and the dead passed from sight, and the three salvos were fired.

SPACE AND DESTINY

Grimm's work revolves around two basic elements, "space" and "destiny." He has never really moved away from these elements, he has always only extended them and rounded them off. For just as at the very beginning they

made up the contents of his hard experiences, so do they later permeate every line he wrote. It is always these two poles around which he revolves and which in all his works exert through their tension a deep influence on the reader, a tension which Grimm increases by means of his exceptional talent for compactness and for massing contrasts.

Yet hardly a reader will feel despair or resignation after having read one of his books. This is where we discover the most significant difference between the literature of the German decadence in the postwar years and present-day literature. For who is there to say that the books of Thomas Mann, for instance, which at their best are only the artistic expression of the morbid imaginations of diseased and weak people, give the reader strength, edification, and the zest and will for life? And who could say that Grimm's books do not contain all this? It is one of the most important achievements of this man that he has given all this to the Germans, and given it in a period when the general atmosphere was that of decline. And this in spite of the fact that his stories are full of cruel incidents and that his figures are twisted and constrained in the narrow confines of their country while abroad they also do not find happiness and meet with constant disaster.

Yet what fine men and women are they, so quiet and brave, so sober and yet so passionate, scorched by suffering, pain, and the African sun, and yet so young and full of zest. His figures do not spend their time analyzing their souls in a sanatorium: they stand in the wide spaces of Africa and, instead of destroying values, they create them. This is why to them and to Grimm the idea of "space" is not a guarantee but only an opportunity for them to become what they are. And to them, destiny may mean some end but not the end; for "the fame of their deeds remains greater than the end," having its effect far into the future. Indeed, one of the wonderful things about Grimm is that, in the wide circle of his works, there is never anything

really used up or ended. He and his figures are as inexhaustible, deep, and stern, but also as pure and clear as his nation.

Hans Grimm is now sixty-seven years old. The number of his readers has grown, especially since 1933, in Germany as well as abroad. In Japan, Grimm already has a considerable circle of admirers. The first of his works to be brought out in Japanese were four stories from *Der Richter in der Karu*, translated by Yoshitaka Takahashi. Last year Shinichi Hoshino brought his years of painstaking translation of *Volk ohne Raum* to a successful close and published the work in four imposing volumes.

YOUNG WARRIOR

The younger generation of writers has from the beginning accompanied the National-Socialist movement with its literary production. Like their great predecessors, these young "guardians of our character" are rooted in the soil of their country and, like them—but often more clearly and more boldly so—they are heralds and fighters of nation and Reich. Their essence is the finally achieved unity of the nation which has found its way back to its natural union; and their star is the idea and the purity of the Reich. Since this unity and this Reich had to be won through struggle, the main content of this literature is the experience of the warrior soul. It is not concerned with problems and suppressed complexes, but with upright attitudes and burning aims; it is not concerned with parts or with dependence on chance, but with the whole. This is one of the characteristics of the literature of our time. Another and perhaps even more significant trait is the fact that, throughout the entire modern German literature (but certainly not by government edict, as is still often claimed abroad), a new faith makes itself felt which seeks for an answer to the great new questions of our time.

From the works of these numerous poets and writers we shall mention only one here, but one who in his attitude

and ability is a worthy representative of them all. This is Gerhard Schumann, born in 1911 in Esslingen in southwest Germany, who wrote his first poems in 1930 as a student, and who now, like so many of his young comrades, is a soldier at the front.

In Schumann's works the burning passion of a National-Socialist fighter is combined with disciplined language and an upright spiritual attitude. Schumann fuses the religious world with the national. In his works, which are imbued with truthfulness, manliness, and mature composure, he has given us a symbol of what, through suffering and want, struggle and death, the Reich has come to mean to all Germans. For the idea that carries along this young talent is the Reich. This "dream of the Reich," which, in the midst of a disintegrating epoch, forced itself up through his veins into clear consciousness, is his fundamental emotion. And it is this emotion that has guided him in struggle and growth, in thought and deed. His poems revolve around it. And in ever new allegories he sings of this emotion in his poems and postulates it as the spiritual property of all Germans. With question and answer, love, hatred, and courage he is helping to build the great cathedral of German brotherhood.

ONE MAN IN A THOUSAND YEARS

Even his earliest verses, written during the worst days of the Republic, are filled with a deep religious emotion which inspires the idea of the Reich with an allconquering faith. Later, when the Führer had welded the German people into a strong nation, when through him the German people rallied and thrust open wide the gates to the future of the Reich, this profound comprehension and feel-

ing for the new Reich and its founder resounds even more powerfully in his series of sonnets entitled *Einer im Jahrtausend* (One Man in a Thousand Years). We quote Sonnet XIII:

Als alle sanken, stand er leuchtend auf.
Da fuhr die Scham in Männer, die in Schanden
Entrechtet und gefesselt müd sich wanden.—
Nun strömten als Soldaten sie zuhauf.

Und die ihn noch kaum fassten und verstanden,
In denen wars wie Heimkehr, weh und leis.
Von harten Herzen schmolz das alte Eis,
Weil sie nun sich und ihre Heimat fanden.

Und plötzlich fühlten sie sich tief im Kreis
Des Lebens fromm und selig eingeborgen.
Und wussten: dieses ist des Reiches Morgen,

Den alle Nächte sehnten rot und heiss.
Und der Erfüllung muss das Leid sich beugen.
Als alle zagten, hob er an zu zeugen.

A rough translation of this would be as follows:

When all sank down, he rose in shining glory.
Then men were filled with shame who, in disgrace,
Weary, deprived of rights, had writhed in chains.
Now in great throngs they came to be his warriors.

And though they scarce could comprehend his meaning,
They felt the deep nostalgia of homecoming.
From hardened hearts the icy layers melted,
For they had found their souls, their home, once more.

And suddenly they felt themselves secure,
Enwrapped in bliss by the deep ring of Life.
They knew: this is the dawning of the Reich,

For which each night had yearned, ardent and red.
And to fulfillment, suffering must bow.
When all were faint of heart, he raised his voice.

DECISION AND TRIAL

Schumann is deeply concerned with what is most noble and most powerful in the nation, with "the warriors who will withstand the last assault." He calls for the heroic fight and for the love for the whole that conquers the selfish ego: "Oh surrender thyself, he who says yes is redeemed." But it is not only this that fills Schumann's heart. He has also composed an abundance of poems which, written in a shy,



Gerhard Schumann

reserved form, reveal that he is also familiar with the moments of quiet rest and meditation. Perhaps it is this fact that accounts for the maturity of his works.

In 1938, Schumann published his first play, *Entscheidung* (Decision), that grew out of a play which had been sketched in outline many years before. It is characterized by a profound, conscientious gravity that bears witness to a quality still rare among the playwrights of the day, namely, of not handing in anything unfinished but waiting patiently for the work to mature.

The scene of the play is a city in Germany, the time the spring of 1920, and the content a Communist revolt. Although it deals with events of the time and with the democratic hairsplitting of the postwar years (which Schumann has succeeded amazingly well in typifying), the author is primarily concerned with the great struggle of the present time

and of human activity as a whole, with clarifying the fundamental ideas of the justified revolution as opposed to the criminal one. The author himself says: "I have dared to let people of our time experience, suffer, and stand the tests of our time in words of our time, and I have tried simultaneously to let the timeless, the eternal, that quietly holds us all in its hand, shine through the action and the figures of the play." It is not too much to say that Schumann has succeeded in this attempt.

Today, Gerhard Schumann stands on the battlefield together with his young fellow authors. His latest volume of poems, *Bewährung* (Trial), is determined and filled by this greatest of all struggles the world has ever seen. In simple, severe words, he tells of the essence of German soldiers and German men, of the "spirit of the sacred youth of our nation," which is eternally renewed and which passes through unceasing trials, to form the basis for victory.